

905ers say Greenbelt no place for highway

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Byline: Gideon Forman And Maham Kaleem Contributors Gideon Forman Is A Policy Analyst And Maham Kaleem An Elections Campaigner, At The David Suzuki Foundation.

Body

When you think of regions displaying strong environmental concern, the swath of municipalities encircling the City of Toronto isn't always top of mind.

But something is stirring in suburban Ontario.

A new survey suggests the majority of folks living in the vote-rich 905 belt have a deep commitment to climate action and nature protection.

Parties hoping to make gains in the 2022 provincial vote ought to take note.

A November EKOS poll found 87 per cent of 905ers agree the provincial government should do more to protect Ontario's forests and wildlife. One might imagine that, facing problems from inflation to the pandemic, suburbanites would feel this is no time to worry about green space. Yet almost nine in 10 believe that far from abandoning the issue, government needs to pursue it further.

Seventy-four per cent say Queen's Park should treat climate change as an emergency.

The majority of 905 residents rely on the automobile, but most see value in public transport. Seventy per cent want the province to help transit agencies cover operating expenses like the cost of disinfecting vehicles. There's a measure of self-interest, of course. Drivers know that buses and GO trains reduce traffic. Yet the climate benefit of switching modes is significant.

Most telling of all, 74 per cent of 905ers say the Greenbelt is "no place" for a new four- to six-lane highway.

Ontario's proposed Highway 413 - which would pave over 400 acres of Greenbelt - is touted by the province as a cure for suburban congestion. Yet a majority of suburbanites suggest they don't want it if it goes through protected forests, river valleys and farmland (which it would). The very people it's meant to serve reject it. Indeed, almost seven out of 10 residents in the 905 believe the Greenbelt deserves more protection.

If you ask people in the abstract, "Do you want a new highway?" many will say, "Why not?" But if you link it to destruction of nature, public opinion shifts dramatically. This is one of EKOS's key findings.

Suburbanites want to travel efficiently, but they recognize roads aren't appropriate everywhere. They know that some places must be off limits to expressways.

In a word, they are sensible people, these 905ers.

So sensible that, as we approach a provincial election, the parties would be crazy to ignore them.

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(The EKOS poll of 830 Ontario residents has a margin of error of 3.4 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.)

Gideon Forman is a policy analyst and Maham Kaleem an elections campaigner, at the David Suzuki Foundation.

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